MAGAZINE SECTION **THE OGDEN STANDARD** MAGAZINE SECTION

OGDEN, UTAH, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 22, 1917

Writer Traces Brer Fox to His Lair in Old Indian Hut

BY MEIGS O. FROST.

EVER hear of Brer Rabbit and the Tar-Baby and the Briar Patch?"

Ask that question to the average American youngster and hear the hoot of scorn that greets you. Has he ever heard of George Washington, the cherry tree and the hatchet? Of William Tell, the cross bow and the apple? Of Snow White and Rose Bud? Of Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp? Huh! Of course!

From his earliest memories come crowding the nursery bedtime tales of Uncle Remus and that resourceful cotton tail who put it over Brer Fox so many times. But—

"Ever hear of Tcetkana and Sunitonikoha-aya and the Aso Poska?"

His puzzled look at the question will be duplicated by the vast majority of wise, wise grown-ups. Don't blame them. They can't be expected to be experts in the tongues that were spoken in the Mississippi Valley when De Soto and Iberville first sailed up the Mississippi river exploring a new continent.

Nor can they be expected to know offhand the amazing fact that Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby and the Brier Patch are not of negro origin, but were taken by the earliest negro slaves of the South bodily from an ancient legend of the Biloxi tribe, now almost extinct.

Yes. "Tcetkana" is the real, original Brer Rabbit. "Sunitoni-koha-aya" is the real original Tar Baby. And "Aso Poska" is the real, original Brier Patch.

Brer Fox Really "Towedi."

That trinity that Joel Chandler Harris and his Uncle Remus made immortal brought grins to the faces of solemn red warriors seated about their fires on the Gulf Coast long before the lovable man who delved deep into the South's negro lore was born.

"But Brer Fox?"

That's a painful comment on the business practices of those first French traders who brought bolts of cotton cloth, glass beads, cheap knives and cheaper guns up the Mississippi Valley. It leads us to believe that maybe, after all, the Indian had a faint inkling he wasn't getting the best of those early trading deals. For in the Biloxi legend the sharp, cunning character isn't Brer Fox. It's "Towedi"—the Frenchman! "Toxka," the fox, appears in the Biloxi tongue, but the captains of "skindustry" under De Soto and Iberville took on his qualities in the tales of the natives.

It is from these tales that much of the so-called "negro folklore" was lifted in its entirety by those first negro slaves who worked in the South. And with the years it became an integral part of yarns that were sprung to circles of grinning black listeners who squatted about the mud-plastered fireplaces on the earthen floors of slave-quarter cabins on many a plantation "befo' de wah."

After this, don't think of the American Indian as always in solemn council or on the warpath. He had his lighter moments, and he knew his joke when he saw it.

Legend in Biloxi.

"Burn me, Brer Fox. Hang me. Drown me. But fo' de Lawd's sake, don't frow me in de brier patch," pleads Uncle Remus' hero when the villain of the tale finds him stuck firmly to that immortal Tar Baby. Did the Biloxi Indians have such a sense of humor? They certainly did.

"Eka aso poska isihixti manki edi," runs the Biloxi tale.

"Then, as he lay there, he said he was much afraid of the brier patch," is the English translation. And "aso poska" is the brier patch that doubtless made hundreds of copper-faced Indian babies wriggle with delight, even as their chubby Anglo-Saxon successors have wriggled joyously at the thought of Brer Rabbitt's cunning

"Aso nkishihixti" (Greatly I fear the brier), once more pleads Brer Rabbit as his enemy stands gloating over his tar-entangled plight.

"Ayisahixti ko, aso—asowa inkanatce!"

("Since you fear the brier so greatly into the brier I throw you!")

Thus Brer Rabbit's enemy fell into his strategical trap in the days when the Indians ruled the Valley of the Mississippi.

"De taho. Haxahe dedi Tcetkanadi!"

("Into the brier he was flung. Laughing fled the rabbit!")

Thus the tale ends. Even to the climax the negro slaves took the story from the fast scattering tribes that are now no more.

Last Biloxi Tribe Survivor.

Peacefully living out the few days that are left him, Joe Kiamichi, probably the last survivor of the Biloxi tribe, suns himself daily in front of his roughly-built cabin that fronts one of the unnumbered branches of Big Barataria Bayou.

But eight of the Biloxi blood were found by a United States Government census in 1908. For America has not dealt overkindly with the tribe. But 65 were known in 1829 and 105 in 1805. Colonial records show 175 in 1720, and the earliest estimate of the Biloxians in 1698 was 420.

It was while on a duck hunt down the bayous with Charles Tenney Jackson, author, in his motor-houseboat the Goldbug, that the writer first heard of Joe. His age is unknown.

"'Bout hundred, I guess," he mumbled when questioned.

"Dat Joe-Indian, he queer in de haid," some of the reticent bayou folk had said when the topic had come up among a little group that was seated about a stick fire on the bayou bank, while some of the interminable black Cajun coffee was being dripped in a little tin pot. The duck hunters were there, mingled with the soft-spoken, gentle Cajuns that paddle john-boat and pirogue up and down the network of waterways through the Big Swamp.

"He come here long tam ago, I dunno," was the response questioning brought. 'Minds his own beesness, mos'ly. Sell some moss, 'n' muskrat skins to trade boats, sometams. Live on mush, 'n' lard, 'n' crabs, 'n' feesh mos'ly. Suah laks w'eeskey, too.'

And the talk drifted to some other absorbing bayou topic.

"Dat Joe--Indian" Found.

There are too many queer characters living out their lives in the Big Swamp for the Cajuns to become unduly curious about one more or less.

It was two days later, steering down a crazily-twisting bayou branch, that "dat Joe-Indian" was found. He was a model of reticence to make Cajuns proud. But the wholly adequate "calling card"—a quart of indubitable "w'eeskey"—caused him to mellow and unbosom. Right there the duck hunt ceased.

Brer Rabbit, the Tar Baby and the Brier Patch had been trailed all unwittingly to their home address.

Slowly, as the almost forgotten phrase came out of the limbo of past years, Joe Kiamichi dictated tale after tale in the Biloxi tongue. Jackson, who has cruised for years about the gulf coast and made a hobby of Indian dialects, took them down phonetically.

Joe's own tale was simple. Some ten years ago ("I dunno jus' w'en") he had migrated from Rapides Parish to the "Beeg Swamp." He neither reads nor writes.

But—and read it closely, all friends of Uncle Remus—here is a running English translation of the tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby as he told it in the queer, clucking staccato Biloxi dialect:

The Rabbit helped his friend, the Frenchman, at his work. Potatoes they planted. The Rabbit's share was the potato vines. These he devoured. Then, again, they farmed. Corn they planted this time.

"The roots will I take," said the Rabbit. So he pulled up the corn and devoured the roots. Men say he did not find what he sought (i. e., something to satisfy his hunger).

"Let us dig a well," proposed the Frenchman.

The Rabbit did not desire it. The Frenchman must dig his well alone.

"Never shall you drink its water," said the Frenchman.

"No difference it makes to me," said the Rabbit. "I am used to licking off dew."

Then made the Frenchman a tar-baby and stood it up there close to the well. The Rabbit a piece of cane and a bucket took and to the well he came.

There he arrived, and to him (the tar-baby) spoke he.

The tar-baby said nothing.

"Oh, friend, what is the matter? Are you angry?" asked the Rabbit. With his hand then hit he the tar-baby. To it he stuck.

"Let me go," said the Rabbit, "or on the other side will I hit you."

With the other fore paw he struck the tar-baby. To it he stuck.

"I will kick you," said the Rabbit. He kicked and stuck.

"On the other side will I kick you (if you do not let me go)," said the rabbit.

Again he kicked him. Again he stuck.

And there was he, like to a round ball (of fur).

Then arrived there the Frenchman. Arrived—and tied him.

Tied him and laid him down and was scolding him.

Then said he (the Rabbit) as there he lay, that he was much afraid of the brier patch.

'Brier you fear so greatly—into the brier then I throw you," said the Frenchman.

"Oh, no. Don't!" said the Rabbit.

"Into the brier patch will I throw you," repeated the Frenchman.

"Greatly I fear the brier," repeated the Rabbit.

"Since you fear the brier so greatly," said the Frenchman, seizing the rabbit, "into the brier I throw you."

Into the brier he was flung.

Laughing fled the Rabbit.

Can't you hear old Uncle Remus' "Bo'n 'n' bred in de brier patch, Brer Fox—bo'n 'n' bred in d brier patch!" echo through that Biloxi rabbit's laughing flight?

And here's exactly how the first of it sounded when a Biloxi mother put her papoose to sleep with the tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar-Baby and the crafty Frenchman:

"Tcetkana Towedi tenaxi atamini akitsi ato utcutu. Tcetkana ato pahi duti oxpa. Ekaha kiya yeki kitcutu.

"Tudiya ka nduti xya," hedi Tcetkanadi. Ayekiya tudiya ke dutitcutyaye. Kawak kanedi etuxu.

"Ani-kya-a- ni-knkaketu," edi Toweyandi.

Tcetkana kahani. Ani-kya-o ni kedi xyo.

"Ani kiya ayini dande," hedi Towedi.

"Kako biwo! Ayuya nkakatcki ke nkande xa na," hedi Tcetkanadi.

The spirited, sharp diction of the sententious and gutteral Indian sentences makes the tale curiously vivid, even with the uncouth inversions of the original. And the tale of Brer Rabbit's experiences with the Tar Baby and the Brier Patch is but one of a group that remains as the sole monument to a tribe almost extinct.

One gets a curious shock to find in Joe's tale of "The Brant and the Otter" the same story Aesop told centuries before in the fable of the Fox and the Crane. And the tale of "How Kuti Mankdce (the One Above) Made People" gives in clear Biloxian an Indian version of the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, even to the eating of fruit and the banishment in anger to "earn bread by the sweat of the brow."

"Inkowa atamini aduti yane, iduti yayuke te etiketu nixti!"

('Work for yourself and find food, because you shall be hungry!" is the banishment decree of Kuti Kankdce.)

Also he tells "Why the Buzzard is Bald" and "How the Rabbit Caught the Sun in a Trap,"—tales curiously blended with long-known negro folklore of the South.

The history of the Biloxi tribe is one of the most romantic of all the Gulf Coast Indians. There is no mention of them at all in the narratives of De Soto, but the first people Iberville met in 1669 were, he says, "the Annocchy, whom the Bayogoula called 'Bilocchy.'" They gave their name Biloxi, to the first two capitals of the first Louisiana settlement.

In the latter part of the seventeenth century, Sauvolle records that the Biloxi nation was "destroyed by sickness," which, coupled with its losses in Indian wars, undoubtedly accounts for the swift disappearance of the tribe after the advent of white men in Louisiana. Fifteen Biloxi warriors accompanied St. Denis in his expedition against the Chitimacha in 1707. But thereafter this little nation, with a store of legends unaccountably rich, drifted into obscurity. A few camped on the southern shores of Lake Pontchartrain and then drifted out of sight. Avoyelles Parish for a short time knew of two small encampments. Rapides housed a few. And there history ends.

They were one of the few American tribes that never interred their dead chiefs. Dumont, in his "Memorics Historiques sur la Louisiane," describes their practice of having the dead chief's body dried in smoke "so that they make of it a veritable skeleton."

In their grass-thatched and mud-plastered temple, at the time the French first explored Louisiana, were ranged in succession, on their feet, like statues, the bodies of chiefs of many generations.

The sight of Joe Kiamichi brings that bit of forgotten American history to life. His wrinkled, parchment-like face looks smoke-dried and century-old. Day by day he tends his trotlines in the Big Swamp. They bring him a livelihood. The bayou that flows sluggishly past his door also brings him occasional visitors—occasional "w'eesky." There he camps, a solitary figure that shrouds the forgotten lore of a forgotten people.

Out of the mist of years he has brought Brer Rabbit, the Tar-Baby and a score of other characters that were very real to him before Uncle Remus' creator first heard them.

Who knows what other wraiths drift from time to time before his mind, out of the chaos of racial memories?

RIDING A CAPTURED TURTLE BACK HOME

The South Sea Islands are the place for turtles and the islanders are experts at capturing the clumsy creatures.

There are several curious ways of capturing them. When lying asleep on the water in the sun, a canoe will silently approach, its crew seize the animal and tumble him aboard "before he knows where he is." He is turned on his back, for otherwise he would climb out and swamp the boat.

A native will also swim up quietly behind the sleeping creature, spring on the back of his shell and hold on in such a way that he cannot dive. Having no idea of escaping in any other way, he can be steered whithersoever his captor chooses. Considerable agility and nerve are necessary in accomplishing this feat, for if the man should miss his leap and fall back into the water he is liable to be dangerously cut by the animal's flippers.

An inexpert person or one who wished to have some fun with the turtle might grasp him by the tail. If so, like the Irishman who devised the plan of catching the bull by the horns and rubbing his nose in the dirt, he will do well to have his laugh first. The turtle has his idea of a joke, too, which is instantly to shut his tail close up to his body, whereby the man's hand is held fast as in a vise, and then dive with him to the bottom of the sea.

Most of the turtles, however, are captured on the beaches, whither the females land to lay their eggs, and the males accompany them out of gallantry or to keep guard.

The eggs are laid in a perpendicular cavity about a yard deep, at the bottom of a great circular excavation, which the female scrapes by whirling round like a fly with its wings singed and violently plying its flippers.

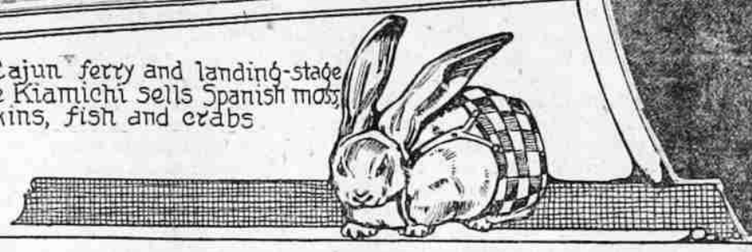
When surprised the turtle offers no resistance, but makes off at a pace surprisingly rapid in so clumsy an animal and which a good runner can hardly keep up with in the sand.

To turn a turtle weighing 400 pounds on its back, and thus capturing it while it is scuttling through deep sand, requires more knack than strength. A turtle's progress on land is by a series of wriggling jerks from side to side, and the fisher, taking advantage of the moment when it casts away from him, overturns it with ease.

The young are hatched in a month, making their appearance when about the size of an American silver dollar, and are prepared to begin life on their own hook at once, which they do by rushing for the sea as rapidly as possible. Many of them never reach it, however, being caught by birds if it be day and by land crabs at night.

JOE KIAMICHI.
Probably last survivor of Biloxi Indians. His age is unknown. Facing the camera, JOE insisted on closing his eyes to avoid influence of the "Evil Eye"

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS



Abandoned Cajun ferry and landing-stage at which Joe Kiamichi sells Spanish moss, muskrat skins, fish and crabs

Water-hyacinth clogged branch of Big Barataria Bayou that is "front yard" of Joe Kiamichi